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ABSTRACT

M. S. Peck (1987) identifies six characteristics of a "true community": (1) inclusiveness (no "in group" or "out group"); (2) commitment; (3) consensus (differences are acknowledged and processed); (4) contemplation; (5) vulnerability; and (6) "graceful" fighting (conflict should not be avoided, minimized, or disregarded). Based on these characteristics, several specific strategies for building community in the diverse speech communication classroom can be followed. First, using student contracts allows students a degree of control in determining the course syllabus. Second, using a name game of sorts or a "personal scavenger hunt" encourages students to know one another. Third, setting ground rules for discussions helps students to know what to expect. Fourth, a 5-minute sharing time helps to build community on a daily basis. Fifth, accepting cards with questions on them helps those with a higher degree of communication apprehension contribute to classroom discussion unobtrusively. Sixth, creating a safe discussion environment in which comments are not ignored or marginalized insures free-flowing exchange. Small group discussions in various permutations and oral presentations are helpful as well. Another strategy that builds community in the classroom is the encouragement of study groups. The groups are randomly organized at first but reorganized for each exam; this arrangement creates an opportunity where peer learning/teaching and support are rewarded. (Contains 40 references.) (TB)

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BUILDING COMMUNITY IN THE DIVERSE CLASSROOM:

Strategies for Communication Professors

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RUNNING HEAD: BUILDING COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

> Real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject...We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom (Palmer, 1993, p. 5).

As indicated by the opening excerpt, building community in the classroom is an important step in maximizing the experiences of student learning. In essence, some scholars (i.e. Orbe & Knox, 1994) believe that the ultimate success of a class hinges on the ability to achieve a sense of community. There is a tendency for many professors to believe that cultural diversity in the classroom inevitably leads to polarized communication and hinders the development of community (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). This, however, is not the case. For community--in it's true sense--to exist some cultural diversity must be present (Peck, 1987).

As our classrooms begin to reflect the diverse population of this country[1], some tension is inevitable. This is especially true from a myriad of communication classes which address (directly or indirectly) the relationship between culture, communication and a variety of contexts (family, relationships, organizations, classrooms, and so on) (Brislin, 1993). Communication professors should expect the level of uneasiness to increase when students from a wide variety of lived experiences are involved in the discussion. However, a diverse classroom is not inherently problematic in this sense.

Wood (1993) posits that professors should cultivate a classroom environment which is "sustaining, rather than resolving this tension" (p. 368). By probing the awkwardness that sometimes accompanies learning new perspectives (especially those which appear to conflict with existing views), professors can facilitate a certain level of self-discovery with students. Negotiating this tension can encourage each student to recognize the differences, while simultaneously acknowledging a sense of commonality among different cultural groups. Speaking specifically about the inherent objectives of different human communication classes, Wood (1993) concludes:

> Realizing that humans are both alike and different--simultaneously diverse and common--allows us to honor and learn from the complexity of human life...I hope to create a productive discomfort that provokes more holistic, inclusive, and ultimately, accurate understandings of human communication and human nature (p. 378).

The primary objective of this paper is to generate an assortment of specific strategies that communication professors can utilize to create a sense of community in their increasingly diverse classrooms.[2] However, before describing these pedagogical strategies, some attention is needed to provide some distinct characteristics that are critical to achieving "true community."

Cultivating "True Community" In The Classroom

Under ordinary circumstances, there is no such thing as

"instant community" (Peck, 1992). Although we tend to describe any number settings--neighborhoods, residence halls, churches, and so on--using the word "community," in most instances these characterizations involve a false use of the word (Orbe & Knox, 1994). A single working definition of "community" is difficult to pinpoint (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). However, Peck's (1987) writings on "true community" appear to offer the most insight into this phenomena, especially as it relates to the classroom setting. He restricts the use of ***community*** to

> a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to 'rejoice together, mourn together' and 'to delight in each other, make others' conditions our own' (Peck, 1987, p. 59).

Specifically, Peck (1987) identifies six characteristics of "true community": Inclusiveness, commitment, consensus, contemplation, vulnerability, and graceful fighting.

Inclusiveness. First and foremost, "community is and must be inclusive" (Peck, 1992, p. 436). Exclusivity, including the forming of ingroup/outgroup status within the classroom, is the enemy of "true community" (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). Including other perspectives is not achieved through forced assimilation (Sitrams & Cogdell, 1976), "cultural chauvinism" (Garcia, 1982), or a forced tolerance of others' perspectives [Pahnos & Butt (1989) use the term "benevolent ethnocentrism" (p. 118)].

Instead, inclusiveness refers to a general acceptance and appreciation of differences-- not as necessarily positive or negative but, as just different (Crawley, 1995).

Commitment. A second characteristic of "true community" is a strong sense of commitment. The willingness to co-exist is crucial (Peck, 1992) to building community. Also inherent within this commitment is a faithfulness to persevere through both positive and negative experiences. Professors must be committed to working with students in order to ensure success, and students should illustrate a certain level of commitment to "hang in there when the going gets rough" (Peck, 1987, p. 62). Typically, it is exactly this sense of commitment which allows community members to absorb any differences in opinion as a healthy means of community development and preservation (Peck, 1987).

Consensus. Communities work through differences in opinion and seek a general agreement or accord among its members. Instead of being "ignored, denied, hidden, or changed, human differences are celebrated as gifts" (Peck, 1987, p. 62) in a "true community." In every situation, developing a consensus requires that differences are acknowledged and processed. In a diverse college classroom, as with other communities, reaching a consensus does not imply forced adherence to majority beliefs. Instead, consensus can involve collaborative efforts or "agreeing to disagree."

Contemplation. Members of a community are consciously aware of their standing as a "community." This awareness involves an

increased realization of self, others, and how these two entities interact with the larger external surroundings. In order for communication professors to promote such a keen sense of awareness, they must first participate in a honest self-assessment themselves (Baker, 1983; Cooper, 1993). This process includes an identification of how personal bias might make its way into the classroom (Weinstein & Obear, 1992). As the professor and students work through these issues, community can develop. However, once achieved, the "spirit of community" (Peck, 1992, p. 439) is not something forever obtained; instead it is repeatedly lost. Therefore, constant reflection of the process toward community is necessary.

Vulnerability. A fifth characteristic of "true community" is a certain level of vulnerability. For community to develop, members must discard their "masks of composure" (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992, p. 262) and expose their inner selves to others (Peck, 1987). For the communication professor, this means creating a "safe place" where students are accepted for who they are (Orbe & Knox, 1994). When professors make themselves vulnerable by displaying their "human" side, students will also do the same. Peck (1992) reveals that vulnerability is contagious.

Peck (1992) describes a community as "a laboratory of disarmament" (p. 441). The word "laboratory" typically conjures up images a cold, sterile, and indifferent setting; "disarmament," on the other hand, encourages visions of a nuclear war. Peck (1992), however, focuses on different aspects of this

phrase. He envisions a laboratory as a place which is safe for experiments to occur; disarmament speaks to a condition when all harmful devices are put aside. Within this respect, a "laboratory of disarmament" creates a classroom where students can feel safe in taking personal risks.

Graceful Fighting. Conflict is a natural process inherent to any group and should not be avoided, minimized, or disregarded (Hocker & Wilmont, 1995). A community can not exist without conflict (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). The fundamental design for communication professors is to create an atmosphere where friction in the classroom is readily addressed utilizing productive conflict strategies. The notion that "if we can resolve our conflicts, then someday we will be able to live together in a community" (Peck, 1987, p. 72) is an illusion. Instead communication professors must lead their classes to believe that if they can learn together in community, then each day they will be able to productively resolve any conflicts.

Specific Strategies To Build Classroom Community[3]

There are undoubtedly countless way in which communication professors can achieve a sense of community in their classrooms. The Speech Communication Teacher and other teaching/training manuals (Border & Chism, 1992; Hawkinson, 1995; Maximizing, 1989; O'Mara, 1994) offer insightful approaches for pedagogical effectiveness. The strategies described, however, speak directly to the issue of building community in a diverse classroom. These are specific strategies that I have used in a variety of

communication classes[4] with different levels of "diversity." The utilization of no one strategy will ultimately lead to classroom community. However, each strategy independently and collectively contributes to the process of building community in a diverse classroom.

Student Contracts. I was first introduced to the concept of student contracts during my years as a teaching associate responsible for covering basic communication classes. The fundamental idea behind a student contract is that the professor allows each student a certain level of control in determining the course syllabi. In this regard, students have some flexibility in selecting assignments, readings, and testing methods which maximize their potential for learning. For instance, some professors have created a menu of options (daily quizzes/ scrapbooks, journals/reflection/experiential papers, multiple choice/essay/take home exams, research project/theoretical critique/oral presentation) and allowed students to select specific assignments that total the number of points allotted by the professor.

In this regard, students are given an active role in creating the course syllabi. It should be noted that such flexibility, given significant planning and direction, does not necessarily diminish the "substance" of the course. When students are given the opportunity to be actively involved in the learning process, the level of commitment to that class increases (Orbe & Knox, 1994).

The Name Game. Encouraging the use of student names in the classroom, by both the professor and students, has shown to be an effective method to establish classroom immediacy (Orbe & Knox, 1994). Given this inclination, I typically use a name game during the first class meeting. Each class is conducted in a semi-circle (unless space and class size prohibit this seating arrangement). On the first day of class, I tell the students that, before we leave today, we are going to learn everyone else's names. Although this announcement is often times met with disapproving nonverbal cues, students typically enjoy the game. The game begins by the first person in the semi-circle stating their first name and an occupation that begins with the first letter of their first name (i.e. Mark the magician). Then the second person in the circle continues the game by telling the class "This is Mark the magician, and I'm Linda the lawyer." The game concludes when the last person in the circle introduces her/himself and can remember (sometimes with a few hints) all the other names and occupations.

Without a doubt, this introductory exercise increases the likelihood that students, as well as the professor, will remember and use names in and out of the classroom. Students who participate in this activity often comment that they still remember the names of fellow classmates in class years past.

Personal Scavenger Hunt. Another introductory activity that I sometimes do during the first class involves a Personal Scavenger Hunt, also known as "Making Common" (Pearson & West,

1991). Students are asked to take out a piece of and divide it into threes both vertically and horizontally (making nine squares once the sheet is opened). Students are then asked to write one bit information about themselves in each box. Once this is completed, the students are asked to find other students who share information that is listed on their sheets (but not necessarily listed on both students' sheets). The exercise typically lasts ten to fifteen minutes.

This exercise is an excellent avenue to get students to discover a certain degree of homophily that is present in the classroom, but also creates an atmosphere where differences are acknowledged, appreciated, and highlighted. According to Woods (1993), this inherent dialectic--embracing the tension between "diversity and commonality" (p. 368)--is an important consideration in a classroom. The "Diversity Exercise" (Orbe, 1992), which involves peer interviews, is another activity which accomplishes this objective.

Classroom Ground Rules. Preliminary ground rules for class discussions are needed for each college classroom. These ground rules can be explicit or implicit and should reflect the expectations of the professor. When cultivating a classroom community, preliminary ground rules should be introduced, discussed, edited, modified, and accepted by the entire class (Orbe & Knox, 1994). Ideally, this process should be initiated during the first couple of classes and revisited whenever

appropriate. I have found that posting or distributing these ground rules assists in community adherence.

Clear ground rules are especially important in certain classes (i.e. Gender and Communication) where intense discussions are likely. However, in a community where different perspectives are expected and honestly dealt with, ground rules which work to diminish communication barriers [polarization, allness, and indiscrimination (DeVito, 1995)] assist in creating a "laboratory of disarmament" (Peck, 1992, p. 441).

Building Community. At the beginning of each class, I take the time to "build community" (this is actually the term that I have used in past years). Five or ten minutes are spent where the class benefits from hearing what is happening on campus and in the lives of their classmates. During this semester, for instance, I have taken this time to announce and congratulate students for different accomplishments (birthdays, scholarships, entrance to graduate programs, athletic success, new jobs, internships, and so on). This period of affirmation and felicitation appears to contribute to a cohesive classroom environment.

Index Card Inquiries (ICIs). In any given class, professors can identify those students who do considerably less talking than other students. In some instances, level of participation has been correlated with certain aspects of diversity (i.e. Sadker & Sadker, 1992). Using ICIs is one strategy that I use to increase the chances for participation in communication classes.

The strategy is a simple one. At the end of each class, students are given an index card and instructed to write (anonymously) one question or comment that they had concerning the topics of discussion for that day. Typically, I begin the next class by addressing something that was submitted on one of the notecards. Students, especially those with a certain level of apprehensiveness, appreciated the opportunity to contribute in this unobtrusive manner. Using personal journals or reflection papers (graded or ungraded) are other avenues which foster greater feelings of community (Maher & Thompson-Tetreault, 1992).

"Truth & Lies." As discussed earlier, one characteristic of "true community" is vulnerability. One of the challenges for communication professors is to create a "safe" classroom where students feel comfortable in participating freely without the risk of having their comments ignored, marginalized, or evaluated. I try to use the "Truth & Lies" exercise to create an environment where exposing one's inner self is "relatively safe."

I typically illustrate how the activity works during the first week of classes. The activity begins by one person sharing three things about her/himself, two of which are true. Students are then allowed to ask questions before guessing which statement is the lie. Once I have completed the exercise (using some of the more colorful "facts" about my life), students are asked to prepare their own "truths and lies." In subsequent classes, volunteers are asked to share their "truth and lies" (typically at different strategic times like when the class needs an

energizer). Additionally, my experiences have demonstrated that this exercise is an excellent application for discussions on a number of communication concepts (self-disclosure, social penetration, nonverbal and verbal cues when lying, and the Johari window).

Chitlings Test. While attending a graduate seminar on **The Black Child** a couple of years ago, I created a "1990 Chitlings Test" (Orbe, 1993). The "test" includes a number of colloquialisms, such as "the hawk is out" and "his nose is wide open" that are used within the African American community. I have used this exercise in a number of my basic communication classes to illustrate the functions and characteristics of different co-languages. Typically, I give students an opportunity to create their own "co-language test" and have received a variety of responses that describe communication which occurs in a number of specific co-cultures (i.e. "Lesbigay Lingo," "Catholic communication," and "Terms for Deer Hunters").

Researchers have consistently found that one factor that influences an underrepresented student's sense of belonging in the classroom is whether or not the course content and examples reflect their lived experiences (Banks, 1981; Pahnos & Butt, 1989; Woods, 1993). Spitzack and Carter (1987) also note that diversifying the curriculum can not be effectively done when multicultural examples are marginalized outside of the core [curriculum]. The **Chitlings Test** is just one illustrative exercise which works to affirm the experiences of

underrepresented group members as an integral aspect of a basic communication course (Woods, 1993).

Group Discussion Points. The utilization of small group work in the college classroom is highly beneficial to increasing participation levels, promoting peer interaction, and creating a sense of community (Woods, 1993). Furthermore, "conscious-raising groups" (Woods, 1993) can be used effectively to integrate "critical analysis with discussion of personal experience" (hooks, 1990, p. 90) on different communication concepts.

Over the past few years, I have worked diligently to include different forms of group work in my communication classes. After advancing past the misconception that this strategy was one that "lazy" professors used, I began to notice the real benefits of this fundamental pedagogical approach. In some classes, I create a series of "Discussion Points" which reflect different questions that relate to the topic at hand. Then, I divided the class into groups of four to six students (often switching how this is done to "mix" up the groups) and have them select a "Discussion Point" to address. A spokesperson from each group then shares their response to the item and other class members begin to engage in dialogue. Without exception, this strategy results in a lively discussion where different members--including some who typically do not articulate their ideas--utilize their personal experiences in support or opposition of the "Discussion Point."

Oral Presentations. Another class assignment that I use in order to "invite multiple voices into the classroom" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986) is a required oral presentation or "mini-lecture." Within most communication courses, some type of oral presentation is required. I typically require students to present (individually or in dyads) a "mini-lecture" which embodies some information from the text. Students are instructed to use some type of presentational aid (videotapes, skits, overheads, and so on) to apply the information presented. I strongly encourage that students find ways to illustrate concepts from their own lived experiences.

This assignment has a number of benefits as it cultivates community in the classroom. First, a classroom environment that validates different experiences, which has been correlated with increased motivation and performance (Pahnos & Butt, 1989), is promoted. Second, the traditional mode of university teaching which presumes "professor as expert" (Woods, 1993) is eliminated. Each student is substantiated as an "expert" within their own level of experience. A third benefit of this type of assignment is that it promotes a multitude of instructional approaches which are effective for different learning styles (Anderson & Adams, 1992; Collett & Serrano, 1992). In addition, Carbo & Hodges (1988) found that

> students who understand and then are provided opportunities to make use of their learning styles tend to feel valued, respected, and empowered (p. 7).

Study Groups. Another strategy that I have used to build community in the classroom is the encouragement of study groups. In some instances, I have formally arranged examination study groups that compete with one another for bonus points. Study groups are randomly arranged for the first exam. Students are then told that the each member of the group that receives the highest average on the exam will receive five bonus points added to their score. This arrangement creates a wonderful opportunity where peer learning/teaching and support are rewarded. For the next two exams, study groups are reorganized (to gain a balance of high/middle/low exams scores) and the process is repeated.

This strategy has contributed to a real sense of cohesiveness in the classrooms. Building community in the classroom often involves moving away from competitive environments prevalent within the traditional college classroom (Treichler & Kramarae, 1983; Wood & Lenze, 1991a; 1991b). However, the competition between the study groups in this instance is typically at a healthy level, whereas the supportiveness and encouragement that occurs within the groups is phenomenal. After the third exam, students have found that they have had the opportunity to work with the majority of other students in the class. In subsequent semesters, these study groups often transcend into different classes that students share.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to equip communication professors with an assortment of specific teaching strategies that can be employed to cultivate a sense of community in the college classroom. In order to cultivate a "true community" as defined by Peck (1987), professors must work toward a classroom environment which exhibits inclusiveness, commitment, consensus, contemplation, vulnerability, and graceful fighting. The strategies described in this paper contribute to the development of one or more of these community characteristics. Diversity (defined quite broadly here) is a condition, not an obstacle, to community. With that in mind, specific attention was given to how these pedagogical approaches work to create community amongst diverse students.

For some, the notion of "true community" is idealistic and a unreasonable goal for a classroom for any number of reasons (i.e. semester/quarter length, class size, and so on). However, I believe that it is an admirable goal that we should strive to obtain. As one famous radio personality attests, "We should shoot for the moon, because even if we miss we will still be among the stars." Such a philosophy is also true for building community. As we strive to obtain "true community" in the classroom, we increase the likelihood that "real learning" (Palmer, 1993) will occur.

"For academics in communication, the issue of diversity is especially significant" (Woods, 1993, p. 368). We have a

remarkable opportunity to utilize the productive communication strategies generated by the scholars in our field to create "small communities" in our classroom. Ideally, our students will take the example that we set with them as they become the leaders of the 21st century.

ENDNOTES

1. In this context, diverse populations refers to the wide variety of cultural groups in the United States. When "diversity" or "cultural diversity" are used in this paper, the intent is to be as inclusive as possible. A diverse classroom, in this sense, may consist of people of color, gays/lesbians/bisexuals, non-traditional students, students with disabilities, international students, students from a lower socio-economic status as well as those more "traditional" students. Moore (1993/94) offers a significant amount of insight into this broad definition of diversity.

2. Without question, some classrooms are more diverse than others. However, given the broad definition of diversity explained earlier (including abilities, affection/sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, gender, national origin, socio-economic status), **all classrooms contain some diversity**.

3. A few of the strategies explored here are original, however most of these approaches have been used by teachers and trainers in a variety of settings. Whenever possible, I have cited those strategies that are recorded in other materials.

4. Over the past five years, these pedagogical strategies have been implemented within a myriad of communication courses (introduction to communication, public speaking, interpersonal communication, gender and communication, communication theory, persuasion) with a great deal of success.

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